Bishops Burning Bridges

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When I was in Catholic graduate studies, our instructors would alert us to incoming papal encyclicals. Excitement would build, delectatory anticipation of what Pope John Paul might say. When it was finally promulgated, it would be all the buzz during class breaks, as we sieved out insights about suffering, women, the elderly, and always, always Jesus Christ.

Now I look back on that innocent spiritual intoxication the way I remember long-ago family Christmas celebrations when the parents and grandparents were still alive: a time of confident happiness because the elders were trustworthy and strong.

You know where I'm going: that confidence is blasted all to smithereens. I still watch for new pronouncements from the Vatican, but now I do so with a sense of dread and sorrow. At best, you can sift through documents and find one or two things to keep, allowing the rest to mercifully blur. There is no joy and little insight.

What a sad and unnecessary devolution, for people to have developed a hard shell to protect themselves from the pope and those bishops who run his playbook. Remember in 2018 when the USCCB decided to take no action on McCarrick because the pope encouraged them to wait, and then nothing ever came of it? The uproar receded, McCarrick was safely tucked away in a remote country refuge, and no one ever took action, confirming the impression that the bishops protect predators in their ranks, no matter how nightmarish.

As much as the American public is shocked by the ongoing DOGE revelations of our abuse by the Federal government, betrayal by spiritual leaders is infinitely worse. We are forced to defend ourselves against the very ones entrusted with our spiritual care.

We aren't born with natural defenses against our parents; we are divinely designed to love and honor them. No more are we equipped to defend ourselves against priests, bishops, and the pope in the spiritual realm. We are not meant to fear them; we are meant to trust them. As prelates have abused our trust, repeatedly, they have themselves created the suspicion with which we now regard them.

After the uncountable abuses and cover-ups, the financial scandals in the Vatican, the promotion of clerics who are demonstrably anti-Catholic and the scuttling of those who proclaim Christ, after paying off accusers with little to no investigation and ruining the lives of innocent priests while failing to do a bloomin' thing about those who patronize gay sex apps for meetups and text their lovers late at night...the bishops will have few left to support them if law enforcement arrives to investigate malfeasance.

Many of us will, in fact, thank God for whoever will clean up the Church when we could not do it ourselves because of that particularly Catholic instinct that can't quite think ill of a bishop or priest. The secular authorities are not handicapped in that way.

As a layperson wounded by the bishops, over and over, I lament the hard-heartedness with which I now regard them. The only bishops I perceive to be interested in the spiritual well-being of their people have allowed themselves to be bound and gagged in the aftermath of Bishop Joseph Strickland's unjust removal from his diocese. The Vatican chill factor has worked well on the rest of the U.S. episcopacy.

Had all the bishops been Stricklands, the laity would rise with good heart and vigor to defend them. As it is, corrupt or craven bishops may retain some promoters, but those will tend to dribble away with too much scrutiny by secular authorities.

The bishops missed an opportunity; they should have regarded Strickland as a prophet not a pariah.

Strickland models the good shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep, and the laity know that instinctively. But those who fatten themselves on their flocks, or decline to speak words of warning when the flock is in mortal danger, face penalty. There is no shortage of admonition in Scripture about the behavior of shepherds, who are held to such a high standard because the sheep are virtually defenseless in the hierarchical structure of the Church.

Woe to the shepherds of Israel, who only feed themselves! They eat the fat, wear the wool and butcher the fattened sheep, but do not feed the flock. (Ezekiel 34:2-3)

You have scattered my flock and driven them away, and have not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for the evil of your deeds, declares the Lord. (Jeremiah 23:2)

Like ravenous dogs, they are never satisfied. Shepherds with no discernment, they all turn to their own way, each one seeking his own gain. (Isaiah 56:10-11)

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